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MEDIA RELEASE

University of Pretoria expert to lead WHO group probing origins of novel pathogens including COVID-19

PRETORIA – Professor Marietjie Venter of the University of Pretoria (UP) has been selected to chair the international scientific advisory team appointed by the World Health Organization (WHO) to probe the origins of novel pathogens including SARS-CoV-2.

Prof Venter, Head of the Zoonotic Arbo and Respiratory Virus Programme at the Centre for Viral Zoonoses in the Department of Medical Virology at UP, will chair the prestigious Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO).

The group's Vice-Chair is Dr Jean-Claude Manuguerra of France. The group consists of experts with a wide range of expertise from across the world. Prof Venter is the only South African. The members will work for free and in their individual capacity.

The SAGO will advise WHO on the development of a global framework to define and guide studies into the origins of emerging and re-emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential, including SARS-CoV-2. Prof Venter is a medical virologist with extensive experience in emerging and zoonotic vector-borne and respiratory viruses. She uses the One Health approach to solve disease outbreaks in humans, animals and the environment. She has a background in molecular epidemiology, laboratory science including biosafety, viral diagnostics, virus discovery, pathogenesis and public health.

The international expert group was selected from 800 applications from over 100 countries. The group held their first meeting on 23 November and agreed to meet frequently and focus urgently on advising on the overarching framework to study the emergence of novel pathogens, as well as to rapidly undertake an assessment of the current understanding of the origins of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

The SAGO will have the following functions:

- To advise WHO on the development of a WHO global framework to define and guide studies into the origins of emerging and re-emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential;
- To advise WHO on prioritising studies and field investigations into the origins of emerging and re-emerging pathogens of epidemic and pandemic potential, in accordance with the WHO global framework described in point (1) above;
- To provide information and views to assist the WHO Secretariat in the development of a detailed work plan of the SAGO.

According to WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, “The emergence of new viruses with the potential to spark epidemics and pandemics is a fact of nature, and while SARS-CoV-2 is the latest such virus, it will not be the last.”

Prof Venter added, “If the origin of new pathogens can be identified it may enable us to put control measures into place to prevent transmission to humans, reduce the impact of local epidemics, and prevent future pandemics.”

She described the selection as “a career highlight, and a huge honour for me personally to serve in this role. I see this as an opportunity to use my training in zoonotic diseases, One Health, molecular epidemiology, laboratory biosafety and public health to lead an exceptional selection of scientist to investigate the origin of emerging diseases such as COVID-19, but also the next disease X that may cause the next pandemic.”

She says important lessons have already been learned. “The origin of COVID-19 may not be known yet, however the speed by which the new virus was identified, the rapid development of sensitive diagnostics, the ability to detect variants through genomic surveillance, and the development of effective vaccines through international collaborations is in my opinion the most significant progress to date.”

Caption: Prof Marietjie Venter, Head of the Zoonotic Arbo and Respiratory Virus Programme at the Centre for Viral Zoonoses, in the Department Medical Virology at UP, will chair the WHO’s Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO). The group has 27 experts, of which Prof Venter is the only South African.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 113-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only university in the country that has a Faculty of Veterinary Science which is ranked top in Africa, and overall has 120 academic departments, as well as 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Center for World University Rankings. It is also ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology and law), and among the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings once again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond university and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training to its students.

As one of South Africa’s research-intensive universities, UP launched the Future Africa Campus in March 2019 as a hub for inter- and transdisciplinary research networks within UP and the global research community to maximise 4IR innovation and address the challenges and stresses our continent and world is facing. In addition UP also launched the Javett Art Centre in September 2019 as a driver of transdisciplinary research development between the Humanities and other faculties. In November 2020 UP launched Engineering 4.0. as a hub not only for Smart Cities and Transport, but also to link the vast resources in

technology and data sciences to other faculties via Future Africa. These initiatives are stimulating new thinking at the frontier of 'science for transformation'.

For more information, go to www.up.ac.za